

An Unconventional Tradition

Arab Christian Israeli diplomat George Deek to address Beth Am

By Melissa Gerr

IN WHAT HAS BECOME A HIGHLY anticipated afternoon of learning, lively exchange and contemplation open to congregants and the community, Beth Am Synagogue's Yom Kippur afternoon programming this year features Arab Christian Israeli diplomat George Deek, who will share his unique take on current events in the Middle East; annual favorite Rheda Becker with her powerful Martyrology presentation; and an open forum in which "you get the rabbi up there when his blood sugar is lowest and pepper him with questions about anything Jewish," said Beth Am's Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg.

Burg, who joined Beth Am in 2010, described the forum topics as "anything goes" as long as it's Jewish content. He typically fields questions that range from political to religious to personal views, he said.

The forum tradition harkens "back to Dr. Louis L. Kaplan, our founding spiritual leader," explained Burg, who looks forward to it each year. "It's just a chance for people to talk to me, and I try to make it as conversational as I can."

Burg invited Deek as a special guest; he learned about Deek through a recent magazine profile that featured a video lauded as "the best speech an Israeli diplomat ever held." The speech came from Deek's tenure in Oslo, Norway.

"He is this young dynamic thoughtful Israeli diplomat who was doing the hard work of representing the State of Israel in Oslo, and, in addition, the fact that he is an Arab Christian, I found to be intriguing," said Burg. "Mostly I'm interested in hearing a highly regarded Israeli

diplomat and his particular take on Israel and Zionism, and I'm also intrigued by his life story."

And Deek's story is a fascinating one, especially at the young age of 31.

Currently on a year leave from the diplomatic corps, Deek is a Fulbright Scholar at Georgetown University. Also a lawyer, he was deputy ambassador for three years in Nigeria and then in Norway, where his last year was spent as acting ambassador during the time of last summer's Operation Protective Edge. He was there for the first Israeli presidential visit to Norway and had the honor to share a table with former President Shimon Peres and King Harald V and Prince Haakon of Norway. Deek's family, who fled to Lebanon during the 1948 war but soon after returned, has lived in Jaffa for more than 400 years.

For such a resume, his demeanor is easy going, but his passion for shedding light on and generating inspiration for change in the Middle East is palpable. He will address this passion at Beth Am.

"For me to have the opportunity to speak on that day ... a day to cleanse yourself toward God and preparing your soul for the next year ... is a real honor and unique opportunity," Deek said.

"Coming from a region of the Middle East that is torn into pieces by wars and intolerance and waves of immigrants [fleeing] and communities being eradicated and exiled ... how can we have our own Yom Kippur?"

"What is necessary for our region to do in order to cleanse itself from its current sins and to find a new path? What are the weaknesses or the



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George Deek will speak at Beth Am Congregation on Yom Kippur, and he is also "very eager to learn" about Americans' and Jewish Americans' perception of Middle East events.

issues we are suffering from, and how can we take it forward?

"I believe Israel specifically has a special role in that process to reach a new reality," Deek answered, "where minorities and people of different backgrounds, ethnicities and religions can actually continue to live in that region that they've called home for so long."

Deek will also address the rise of religious extremism and "one of the biggest challenges we're facing today, and that is the rise of a possible nuclear Iran."

But his desire for the afternoon is also to listen and learn. Being new to the United States, he's "very eager to learn" about Americans' and Jewish Americans' perception of Middle East events, especially in Baltimore, a city that has seen violence based on discrimination and racial background, he said. "I'm really looking forward to hearing the Baltimore experience," with hopes of applying it to his work in Israel.

Also part of the afternoon is professional narrator and founding Beth Am congregant Rheda Becker's

Martryology presentation. She is “legendary in Baltimore” said Burg. Her presentations have become a congregational favorite, with Burg calling them “moving, haunting and spectacular.”

Martryology stems from the part of the Yom Kippur service that tells the story of 10 Talmudic sages murdered by Romans, but Becker’s take is contemporary.

of the presentation.

Becker lauds Beth Am’s congregation for being diverse in every way and a community that encourages deep thinking about difficult issues.

It’s important to “bear witness to what happened and to those who were murdered simply because they were Jews,” she said. “That’s why we do this; it’s not about being unhappy or listening to horrors. It’s the least

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— George Deek, Israeli diplomat

In past years, her stories and personal accounts of martyrs have drawn from periods such as the Spanish Inquisition, the Stalin regime and the Holocaust.

“This year is a very unusual one, it’s Samuel Pisar, who recently died” and who was a Holocaust survivor, said Becker, who has also performed as narrator for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for more than 40 years. “Pisar was a renowned international lawyer and I knew about him because he wrote a text for the ‘Kaddish,’ by Leonard Bernstein.

The stories are intentionally “about specific people and what happened to them, not generalizations,” said Becker, who researches her subjects in great depth, usually for months in advance. “[Pisar’s] story is one of such incredible self-recovery and accomplishment, even though he was only 10 when the Nazis came. I’m going to read some of the text from his ‘Kaddish,’ as part

we can do is to hear the stories of their suffering.”

She added, “This is something we do only on that day. It’s not printed or published — I speak it that day, and together we bear witness as a congregation. I think of it as one of the greatest privileges in my adult life, to learn about the history of these people.” Jr

**Beth Am Synagogue
Yom Kippur Event**

2501 Eutaw Place
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